

Education Committee

Oral evidence: School Attendance, HC 1216

Tuesday 22 July 2025

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Sir James Cleverly; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sewards; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1-33

Witnesses

[I](#): Julie McCulloch, Senior Director of Strategy, Policy & Professional Development, Association of School and College Leaders, Dr Susan Morris-King, Deputy Director for Schools and Early Education, Ofsted, Heather Sandy, Chair of the Association of Directors of Children's Services Education Policy Committee and Executive Director of Children's Services for Lincolnshire County Council and Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Deputy Chair of the LGA's Children & Young People Board, Local Government Association.

[II](#): Ellie Costello, Deputy Chair of the LGA's Children & Young People Board, Local Government Association, Rachael Kenningham, Deputy Chair of the LGA's Children & Young People Board, Local Government Association and Dan Lilley,

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Julie McCulloch, Dr Susan Morris-King, Heather Sandy and Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson.

Chair: I welcome members and witnesses to this public session of the Education Committee. Appropriately for the last day of the parliamentary term, we are turning our attention to school attendance, with a deep-dive evidence session on the challenges around that and the approaches currently being taken to tackle those challenges. I invite our witnesses to introduce yourselves, and you might like to take this opportunity to make any relevant declarations of interest as you do so. I will start with Councillor Vernon-Jackson.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: I am Gerald Vernon-Jackson, deputy chair of the children and young people board at the LGA. I was leader of Portsmouth city council for 15 years. I am now Lord Mayor, so I am having to be careful of what I say! I am an active Lib Dem, so I know both

Manuela and Caroline Voaden, and Amanda, if she turns up, is one of my local MPs, so I know Amanda as well.

Chair: I think Amanda has sent apologies for not being here today, but that is great; thank you.

Dr Morris-King: I am Dr Sue Morris-King, HMI. I am deputy director for schools and early education at Ofsted.

Julie McCulloch: I am Julie McCulloch, senior director of strategy, policy and professional development at the Association of School and College Leaders. I don't think I have any relevant declarations of interest beyond that.

Heather Sandy: I am Heather Sandy, director of children's services at Lincolnshire county council and chair of the education committee at the Association of Directors of Children's Services—ADCS.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for being with us this morning. I will lead off on the questioning today. First, can you say a bit about the current situation regarding rates of overall, persistent and severe absence among children of school age and whether you are particularly worried about certain groups of children in this regard? I will start with Councillor Vernon-Jackson.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: My understanding is that absences overall are getting better and persistent absences are getting better as well, although we are not yet back to where we were before the pandemic, but the group of children who are away from school for 50% of sessions or more is continuing to increase. It is extremely worrying that there are kids who are disengaging. I am sure we will go on to talk about causes and particular things that we might be able to do in the future, but I think that sets the scene.

Dr Morris-King: We are particularly concerned about pupils who are disadvantaged, who have not come back to school at the same rate as pre-pandemic. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities have always been a group of pupils who have not attended school, in some cases, as well as their peers. That continues to be the case post pandemic.

One of the groups that Ofsted has commented on and which we are concerned about is pupils receiving a fragmented or sporadic education who do not attend frequently enough, including some of those on part-time timetables. That includes some of the pupils who are electively home educated and have been removed from school by the parents since the pandemic, where there are concerns that they may not be receiving the education that they should.

Julie McCulloch: I have similar views to those already expressed by colleagues. It is good to see the attendance rates creeping up slightly, but we and our members are still really concerned about how far we are from the pre-pandemic rates, which were also concerning.



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We are concerned about overall absence, particularly persistent and severe absence. The children who our members tell us have the most persistent and severe absence and the most challenges in helping them to come back into school are children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those eligible for the pupil premium and free school meals. There is also a group of children, many of whom will be in the other groups but not all, who may have quite disordered home lives and as a result find it challenging to come into school. At some point, I would like to get on to the point about how those children are classified as absent when they are late, which we are worried about.

Heather Sandy: I agree with the comments from other panel members. We know that most children attend school every day, and we know why that is really important for them to benefit from the academic, social and emotional support that schools give. We are really concerned about the severe and persistently absent pupils among that cohort. While I agree that we have seen a small increase in attendance, it is not back to pre-pandemic levels. Actually, among the severe absences, it has increased threefold, so we have significant problems there.

We are particularly worried about whole cohorts of young people, such as those who are absent because they are suspended from school, or those who are in the six days after exclusion. We are concerned about those children who are absent for mental health reasons or because of disorder in the home. It is about how we support those young people to be in school more, because we know what a protective factor school is.

There are other cohorts outside the scope because they are not defined as "absent", such as those who are having education other than at school. At some point, it would be really good to have a look at some of those packages because they are fragmented and link back to what my colleague has just said.

Q2 Chair: That is really helpful—thank you. Do you believe that this problem is properly understood? Have we really got under the skin of why absence has increased so dramatically in recent years and why it has continued to increase post pandemic? Councillor Vernon-Jackson, you mentioned that the situation is starting to improve and the data shows that, but it is a relatively small improvement against a very big problem. Are you confident that we have a strategic approach to this problem that will mean that rates of absence continue to fall, and we are on a trajectory to get to a more acceptable situation? I will start with Julie McCulloch, and then we can mix it around a bit.

Julie McCulloch: Some aspects of the reasons behind it are well understood, and we are developing a clearer sense of those various reasons. There is a clearer sense emerging of the impact of child poverty on attendance rates and all sorts of aspects of schooling as well, and I think there are some positive moves being made by this Government to look at child poverty and what we might be able to do help with that. I think there is some understanding about the impact of mental health



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concerns; we need to do much more to help with that, but to your question about understanding, I think we are getting somewhere.

There are more conversations to be had about some of the strategies, techniques and resourcing that are there for schools and other agencies to help with attendance. I am sure that we will come on to this, but there are questions about the effectiveness of the various sanctions that are in place, for example, and some interesting questions to be had about what has been talked about as the social contract between schools and families, and I think there is much more that could be done there.

Finally, the other aspect that I think is not at all well understood or well surfaced is within-school absence: children who are making it into school but not necessarily making it into lessons, because they are finding that difficult. Across government, some of that is probably trapped more at a local level, but at the national level I do not think we have a clear sense at all of that group of young people and the impact on their learning.

Heather Sandy: I would agree. We have seen a really sharp focus on attendance from the Government, and that is making its way down into schools and local authorities. That focus is really welcome. I guess the problem is that we understand that it is really complex and overlapping and that the reasons for absence are multifaceted. Therefore, it is not a schools issue, a local authority issue or a health issue; it is a multi-agency issue. Yes, we understand it; yes, we have seen a really big focus on it. We have been really clear that this is a priority, but we will need to work right across all those agencies to be able to address what are very complex reasons.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: As colleagues have said, it is understood, but it is not simple. There is not one particular issue but a whole range, whether it is mental health, chaotic families, deprivation, kids with special educational needs or kids who are being home educated, some of whom are really well educated and some of whom are not. There are lots of different things. Do I think that there is a strategy that is obvious and working? Probably not. I think there is much more to be done. As colleagues have said, this is not a simple thing, and it is not just an education thing, but a societal thing.

As we know, trying to get people to work across Government Departments is almost impossible. It is the same at a local level, trying to get people to work together. I think that some of the things that the Government are doing are very helpful. The way in which, with the Bill coming forward, there will be the need for academies to have a duty to work with councils is very welcome. At the moment it is just one-way: councils have to work with schools. Having a level playing field will help. In some areas it will not make the slightest bit of difference, because everyone works closely together and it is a success, but that does not happen everywhere. Actually, that will be positive.

I think that there are more things that we could and should be doing in terms of mental health provision. The waiting lists for kids to go and see



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CAMHS is appalling. The understanding that we now have of mental health in schools is good, but a 35% target for schools to have mental health support is far too low. I know that in Portsmouth, every school has access to a mental health team, because it is necessary. In terms of special educational needs, we know that it is an enormous problem, and demand is going through the roof. It is killing our budgets; I know that in Caroline's area in Devon, the accumulated overspend on special educational needs is £160 million to £170 million, and with £40 million overspent this year already.

There is not simple answer. There is lots that we could do. One of the things that would make a real difference, working with the most chaotic families—I come from a social work background; I used to work with children and chaotic families—is automatic enrolment for free school meals for every child who qualifies, because the most chaotic and disadvantaged families are the people who do not fill in the forms and do not always provide a breakfast or a packed lunch. Making sure that the most disadvantaged kids do have access to food to keep them working and attract them into school could make an enormous difference.

Chair: You might know that this Committee published that recommendation for the Government about 10 days ago.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: I am glad. I hope you persuade the Government.

Chair: We are awaiting their response.

Dr Morris-King: I absolutely agree with everything that colleagues have said about complexities. It is complex; we see it all the time. I would like to highlight, however, some of the things that we need to hang on to. We published a report in 2022, just as we were coming out of the end of the pandemic, about good practice in schools. We spoke to headteachers, we looked at inspection evidence and we heard what had happened since the pandemic and what schools were doing that really worked. What we heard from those school leaders was that, actually, the things that were working to get their children back in school were the things that are good practice all the time. The schools that were doing this really well, where their figures were going up for all the different groups of pupils, were thinking about their culture and about their communication with families. They were really persistent; they did not give up. When things were not right with individuals, they got underneath what the reasons were, but they also noticed when children were absent just a little bit—when something just dropped a little bit. That was really important.

One of the things that underpins that, which I think has improved in that time, is the data that is available to schools to find out what is actually going on. There is now much better analysis available from DfE, for schools to be able to dip into without having to do it all themselves.

The schools that we see really getting underneath this issue and pushing forward—albeit with the need for additional support from other agencies,



of course—are those that are really getting underneath what is happening and looking at the big picture. We use the phrase “Everybody’s business all the time”. Those schools that are really managing to get their children back in, tricky though it may be, are thinking of this like they do safeguarding—everybody’s business all the time—so all staff talk about attendance, know about attendance, get underneath attendance and know what their role is in that big picture.

Q3 Mrs Brackenridge: We will take some time to explore the causes behind absenteeism. There have been conversations behind that, but I think it is important that we just delve deeper and consider the causes behind absence—as well as parents’ expectations now, because there has been a concerning decline post-pandemic. It is good to see that things are improving, but much more needs to be done. A lot of the press coverage focuses on term-time holidays, but, when we consider unauthorised absences, are the issues much deeper than school-term holidays? I will start off with Heather.

Heather Sandy: Yes, absolutely. There has been a huge amount of coverage on the term-time holidays, but we know that the children who are most likely to be persistently or severely absent are those among the disadvantaged. It is children who are eligible for free school meals, children with additional needs or with an ECP, and children in care or in need. We know, from all the other research we have done regarding those children for other reasons, that that is to do with the additional needs they have and the complexity of the lives that they are living. It therefore goes well beyond the term-time holidays.

I think that the problem is that the coverage links to the fines, and of course the fines have a place in the toolkit, but most schools are not using fines for children who are persistently absent; they are working with families, and spending huge amounts of resource—huge amounts of time and energy—on that. As my colleague said, schools that are doing it well are prioritising this issue, and I would say that we really need to think about how we are funding that in the long term, because if it is going to remain a priority—and I think it should—we need to make sure that we put it on a sustainable footing and resource schools to be able to do that, and local authorities to be able to support them.

Julie McCulloch: I completely agree with all of that. There is sometimes a change in the way that parents are thinking about term-time holidays, so I would not say that that is not a factor at all—it is, but as Heather said, the reasons run much deeper, particularly the reasons behind persistent and severe absence. We hear exactly the same from our members—that fines are not the part of the toolkit that they reach for with those families.

The challenges there include mental health. We have touched on that a little bit already, but it just should not be underestimated in this space, with the ballooning numbers of young children who are experiencing mental health challenges, and the interplay between that and poverty—and SEND as well. Those kinds of increasingly complex lives that children



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and families are leading can make it very challenging to meet the same levels of attendance as we have seen before.

We touched a little on the social contract earlier. I think that it is important, and it may have been starting to shift pre pandemic. Post pandemic, we really strongly hear from our members that there is an expectation for children to be in school every day, unless there is a very good reason for that not to be the case, and in many families that is still exactly their expectation and what they deliver on. However, there are families where that expectation has shifted, which is affecting not only attendance but things like behaviour in schools. As Gerald said earlier, it is very complex and there are lots of interrelated issues here, which is why it is particularly challenging to get under the skin and find the right solutions in some cases.

Dr Morris-King: Term-time holidays are an important factor to some degree; if pupils are off during term time, they are receiving a fractured curriculum, so they miss out and it is harder to catch up. That can disrupt the patterns of attendance when they get back, because they are behind.

However, I very much agree with what everybody said about it being far more complex. One of the things that we know and see in schools, which we reported on in 2022, is the importance of establishing good attendance patterns from the very youngest age—even in nursery, where it is not actually mandatory for those children to attend. If they are meant to be coming on a certain day, getting into that pattern and rhythm is crucial. Things can sometimes fall through gaps during the transition from primary to secondary, so schools now have year 6 transition data, and picking up any potential issues in advance is a really important factor in trying to prevent some of these issues from happening.

I think we have already touched on the fact that, for those children and young people with particularly severe and persistent absence, we know from what we see on inspection and from our report that really getting underneath the reasons is crucial. A colleague mentioned lateness earlier. When we did our research, one of things we heard from school leaders was they found that, when they get underneath this, some parents were not bringing their children into school because they were going to be late. That fear of embarrassment about being late and in trouble was the reason for them not attending. Those leaders turned that on its head; they not only worked on the lateness with the families but got across the fact that it is better to be a little bit late than not at all. We see that kind of getting underneath the issue, listening and communicating as really crucial.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: Thinking through the benefit or disbenefit to the British economy and the nation as a whole, the group I would most worry about are the ones who are consistently not at school, such as the kids who do not go at all, or almost not at all, for the last two years of secondary.



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If we are producing a generation, or groups of children, with very low educational qualifications or attainment, that is terrible for the British economy. The Elementary Education Act 1870 was brought in because we were falling behind Germany not in educational stuff but economically, and the same is true now. We need to be making sure that, for the good of the economy of this country, and for our society, children are educated so that they come out and can make a real contribution to their lives, their families' lives and to society's lives.

If I was concentrating on the bit that I think is a real problem, it is not kids who are taken out from school for a week but are great the rest of the time; I would be really worried about the ones who are persistently not going to school, and the problem that stores up for the next generation and the generation after.

- Q4 **Sir James Cleverly:** To zoom out, you have said, if I understand you correctly, that while term-time holidays are headline-grabbing, they are not the biggest or broadest issue. You have touched on a number of areas, whether it be poverty or chaotic home life, and those things have always existed in the education environment. If you were to try to zoom in on the thing that has changed or amplified—or it could be something new—to cause that big recent increase, what do you think has been the most significant contributory change?

Heather Sandy: One of the things I would mention is that we have seen a really big rise in exclusions and suspensions, and they are adding to the absence rates. That is the bit that I do not think we understand very well. I do not think it is the biggest factor, but none of the things that we are doing will support a child who is not allowed into school to be in school. For me, that is something that we need to consider as we move through it.

I think the pandemic changed the social contract that Julie referred to. During the pandemic, for the first time, we told parents that children did not need to be in school—that they could be educated at home because that was the safest place for them to be. Some children really enjoyed that, some children really thrived on that and made good progress, and it changed parents' view of the requirement to be in school.

We have also seen a ramping up of the curriculum. If you look at the curriculum content over a significant period of time, the amount of coverage has increased. The curriculum review that is being undertaken at the moment needs to consider that really seriously, and I know that it is. I didn't give you only one answer; I am sorry.

- Q5 **Sir James Cleverly:** No, that is good. Julie, you mentioned the social contract, and you are not the only person who has; Amanda Spielman has also spoken about it. Could you expand on that a little bit?

Julie McCulloch: The first point I would make is that yes, poverty has always been with us, but it has increased significantly. We cannot underestimate the impact that is having.



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In terms of the social contract, it is quite hard to quantify or to talk about simply, but something has shifted in the way that by no means all parents, but some parents think about the relationship between their family and their school. Getting under the skin of that is not straightforward. There are issues of curriculum there—the fact that the curriculum is so packed that some children find it very difficult to keep up. Schools are working really hard to look at how they help those children, how they find pathways through the curriculum, how they make sure that children are learning different concepts so that they can keep up. But if you are a child who is struggling to keep up with the curriculum, that very quickly makes you much less inclined to be in school doing that.

Linked to that—this is not a single answer either—I would go back to the increase in mental health challenges, which I really think are a crucial part of this. I am sure you will hear much more about this from your next panel. For various reasons, some children find being in school very difficult, if not impossible. Schools are doing everything they can to support them to stay in school and to get back into school, but there is only so much you can do from within the school. You need to be able to draw on wider children's services, mental health support—all those services that need to wrap around a child and wrap around a school, and those have been decimated, so it is harder and harder for schools and families to find the support that children need to access school in the way that perhaps they did in the past.

Dr Morris-King: To add briefly to what colleagues have said, and to go back to the pandemic, we heard in our 2022 report, and we hear from school leaders, that heads continue to have to do the messaging around illness. During the pandemic and just after, you did not come in to school at all if you had anything very minor. That is not the message that school leaders ought to get across now. That has led to parental anxiety, where parents get very worried and do not necessarily send their children in if they have any hint of an illness.

The other thing that has been touched on is how hard school leaders worked during the pandemic to sell the benefits of remote education, and how actually you could learn at home and that was a good thing, and you did log on and try hard with the work. There are still perhaps some lingering feelings around families that that also could be an answer, and that is part of that social contract: the need to be in school every day to learn is something that isn't quite as engrained as it perhaps was.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: Colleagues have covered this, but the way in which parents were not only given permission but told to keep their kids at home during the pandemic changed things dramatically. It will take a long time for that to work its way out, if it ever does.

There is also the rise in the issues of mental health and special educational needs. What has changed so that the demand for services to support kids for both mental health and special educational needs is going through the roof? Has something actually changed in terms of the children, or do their



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parents have a higher expectation and are therefore asking for more help? The demand is going through the roof and that is a real problem.

Behind it, there is also a bit about the atomisation of public services. In an area, there used to be a system where everybody worked together. That does not exist any more; it is now completely fragmented. Some places have managed to hold that together, but that is not true everywhere. The fragmentation of public services is a real issue.

Q6 Caroline Voaden: I would like to talk about the anxiety that some children have about going to school. A survey by the ASCL showed that 92% of secondary school teachers and leaders had been given as a reason for absence that a child was too anxious to attend school, and 57% of primary school teachers and leaders have said the same. Starting with Gerald, what is driving up anxiety about going to or being at school, and how can it be addressed?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: I do not know—I am not an educationalist; I will rely on people who know more than me—but there are great societal issues for parents and children. The pressures from social media in schools are enormous—thank heavens it did not exist in my day. Bullying has always been an issue, but bullying can now go on 24 hours a day through your phone, which did not happen before, so it is no wonder that some children are very anxious. It is a real problem.

There may be a societal bit—that in the past we used to ignore this, and now we listen more. That is probably a good thing, but it being highlighted more probably means that some parents feel it is right to keep their children away from school for particular times. My colleagues will know more than me.

Dr Morris-King: It is probably not for Ofsted to comment on why. We have not done any research into that aspect. However, we hear from school leaders that they are seeing children who are more anxious since the pandemic. When we talked to them for our report, they told us that they were trying to get underneath what that was about individually with children. Of course, that is time-consuming, which can be tricky, but when they had that conversation with children and their parents and got underneath it, sometimes the anxiety was something fairly straightforward and could be helped by quite a straightforward adaptation within the school day and some support from within the school. In that respect, that analysis and getting underneath was an important factor.

Julie McCulloch: I will add a couple of things to that. I am not a child psychologist but, not to bang on about poverty and complex lives, in terms of what we hear from our members, if a child is living a very complex life—for example, if they are in insecure housing—that will raise levels of anxiety. There is a level of anxiety for children and young people that has always existed to some extent, but it feels particularly sharp at the moment. There is something going on there in the outside world.



I agree about phones and the sense of children being always on, having to curate their own image and potentially never being able to step away from other young people that they have a difficult relationship with. There are some things there.

In terms of the expectations of academic success that children feel they are under, over the last decade or so, for various reasons that we probably do not have time to go into here, we have moved towards a curriculum that is much more focused on academic success and less about broader definitions of success. That has an impact on a lot of children, particularly those with special educational needs. As Susan said, there are things that schools are doing, particularly to try to tackle some of this early. There is a lot of focus in the current Government on early intervention, for various reasons. That is something that our members would really welcome. Cross-agency work is also hugely important in helping with some of this.

Heather Sandy: I agree with what colleagues have said. What I think is different about emotionally based school avoidance is that for different cohorts it can be different. We see high-performing girls for whom the curriculum pressure makes them feel like they do not want to go to school. We see children with diagnosed additional needs, and the physical environment makes them feel like they do not want to be in school. And then we have all those layers of complexity that have been outlined by people on the panel. It is so varied across that.

We have an emotionally based school avoidance service in Lincolnshire, and each young person has a different reason for their anxiety. It is a question of expending time and investment in understanding it. Each parent has a different reaction to it and approach to how they make their child feel safe. Our older children remember being at home a lot in the pandemic, and that does feel like a safer space.

I definitely think social media and the constant projection of perfection is in our children's minds. I am sure it is also in our adults' minds, but when you are young and you are physically and emotionally developing, it is a lot harder to process and understand the difference between the AI images and the real images, so I think that is putting huge pressure on our children and young people.

Q7 **Caroline Voaden:** There is evidence that if schools completely ban mobile phones—not a “Put it in your bag and pretend it's not there” policy, but a “Do not bring it into school” policy—absence is massively reduced. I cannot remember what the percentage is and I could not find it quickly, and I am not quite sure what the correlation is there, but three of you have mentioned the role that mobile phones and social media are playing in kids' anxiety. Very briefly, because we do not have a huge amount of time, do you think a total ban, so no phones in school—with exceptions for children who need medical technology, for example—is a better way to go than just asking kids to put their phone in their bag and pretend it is not there?



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Gerald Vernon-Jackson: I would go much further, Caroline. I think social media for kids is not appropriate. You get bullied in your bedroom. When I see groups of youngsters in Portsmouth, they are all on their phones all the time, and it is highly damaging and detrimental to their mental health and developmental stuff.

We have limits in terms of what we say is okay elsewhere. We say that people cannot buy alcohol until a particular age. You cannot buy cigarettes until you are a particular age. You cannot get married until you are a particular age. Yet we are happy to allow youngsters to have social media, which appears to be very damaging to people. I am sorry, but I am an old-fashioned person and I would say that the state should have a role to say that that is inappropriate and that we need to protect our children.

Dr Morris-King: That would be one for the DfE rather than Ofsted to comment on.

Julie McCulloch: I am not aware of that specific piece of research linking phones in schools with absence rates, but broadly we are hearing that schools are moving pretty rapidly towards that sort of approach. There are very few, I think, that are not heading in that direction if they are not there already, which I think is helpful. What we hear is that actually the bigger deal is phone use outside schools—the whole “being at home in your bedroom and not being able to switch off” piece. There are things that schools can do to help in this space, and lots of them are doing them, but the bigger issue is one for Government and wider society.

Heather Sandy: I agree with what others have said. At the moment, that policy is down to individual headteachers and multi-academy trusts. I do think looking really carefully at the guidance and thinking really carefully about that is important.

I also think we need education for young people about this; we need to make sure that our education system and what we teach young people keeps up with what they are experiencing. We have talked a lot about some of the Netflix series and some of the issues they have surfaced, and how we have those conversations, which are not easy conversations to have. How do we have those conversations with young people about what they are seeing on their phones, where that is taking them and what that means for their mental health? From an ADCS point of view, we would like the DfE to look at guidance around that.

From an education point of view, we need to support our young people to deal with what they see on their phones, because even if they do not have them at all at school, they will have them at home, so we need to support them to be able to understand what they are seeing and what it means. We also need to help parents to do that—we need to support them to better inhabit the world that their children are living in through their phones.

Caroline Voaden: If they are banned completely from secondary schools, a lot more parents will delay getting a phone because there will not be the



pressure to get one for year 7. That could mean that children do not start using them until they are a bit older, which in itself could help.

- Q8 **Jess Asato:** I want to move on to some of the legal interventions, such as fines. We have heard that fines are not necessarily effective, particularly for those who are most persistently absent. A number of you have focused on that. In particular, 83% of people who have been sent to prison for a truancy conviction are women, according to Advance, which is a women's charity supporting women in the criminal justice system. In many of the cases they have worked with, the children have issues related to SEND, mental health—which you have mentioned—and the consequences of experiencing trauma. Many of the children may be not attending school because they have been experiencing domestic or sexual abuse at home. Should we be sending mothers to prison instead of supporting them to safely look after their children?

Heather Sandy: I am not aware of those statistics. In my experience, all that will have been considered. I think it is very unusual. You said that 83% of them are women; I do not know the relevant number of people who go to prison, but I think it is tiny. I cannot comment on individual cases, but on the face of it, no, it is not right that we send people to prison and do not support them. I am a huge advocate for early help over legal measures, every time. I think it is very unusual for a parent to be sent to prison in relation to attendance, and I do not know the wider context of those cases.

Even in fining, we are really clear that local authorities have to process the fine on behalf of the school, so we look very carefully at the evidence, as does the judiciary. Without understanding the individual cases and why those people ended up with a custodial sentence, on the face of it, no, I do not think people should be penalised if they cannot care for their children. However, it is very important that people are held to account for caring for their children.

Julie McCulloch: We do not think it should be an issue for the criminal courts; we would much prefer it to be handled through the family courts. That statistic is horrific. I do not think that is a helpful way of addressing the issue. Even before you get to that very extreme end of the spectrum, one of our concerns about fines is that they create an inherently adversarial relationship between the school and parents. We do not think fines should never be issued, but the recent shift in Government guidance towards a much more "support-first" approach, working with parents, is absolutely right, drawing on the wider support from local authorities and other services. We would much rather be in a place where schools, wider services and families can work together to come up with a solution that works.

Going back to the point about complexity, there are still plenty of cases in which that is not working. We need to look further at how we can address that. However, criminalising parents is not the way forward in the vast majority of cases.



Dr Morris-King: What we hear from school leaders who have successfully tackled deeply ingrained absence patterns is that they see fines as only one part of a much bigger picture, and they use a much wider range of strategies. For example, school leaders talk about the importance of presence, greeting children at the school gate, and having the right culture in school in the first place. They also talk to us about the importance of what they call challenging conversations—they did when we talked to them for our report and they do during inspections. They talk about being able to have a challenging conversation with parents, after building up the right relationship in the first place, while making it clear that children need to come into school. It is about that balance of challenge and support, and leaders asking what they can do to help while also saying that they need children in school. They tend to find that persistence is really important.

It is also about having the right people to do that. When we did our research in 2022, we heard a lot about the importance of the right people who can form those relationships with families, and to whom families can open up to and be honest. It is also about training for staff. It is important to help and support staff to have those challenging conversations, because they are not particularly straightforward.

Q9 **Jess Asato:** Gerald, there have been 487,000 penalty notices issued. That does not necessarily sound like support first. How do you think that needs to change going forward?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: My understanding is that local authorities issue the fines at the request of a school head. Part of this issue is that we should better trust school heads and school leaders. It is their judgment about what is appropriate. They know the families and those children, and the council is there to support those school leaders. I do not think I have ever met or heard of somebody being sent to prison for attendance, so it must be a very small number of people.

For a while, I lived opposite a home where a mum and son lived, and he never went to school. People came and knocked on the door, and he would never do what his mum asked him to do under any circumstance. She had absolutely no control over what he would do. It was a really sad thing to watch. Sending mum to prison would have been an entirely inappropriate thing to do, because he never did what his mum or anybody else asked him to do.

There are other much more important groups we should be working with to get them back into school. There are children with mental health problems. If we could address those problems, reassure them and find a way of getting them back into school, in a non-confrontational way, that could make an enormous difference. Being able to give children with special educational needs the confidence that they will get the support in school that they feel they need seems to be a much bigger issue. The number of children being electively home educated who are not getting a good education and are losing out is way more important.



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Years ago, the Government introduced a programme. Effectively, it was called the expenses schools project. The golden thread that went through every single one of those chaotic families was domestic abuse. Domestic abuse seen by, witnessed by or done to children seems way more important to me. Being able to tackle that would have a much bigger effect than sending anybody to prison.

- Q10 **Jess Asato:** The point is that if you have families who are already going through a lot of stress and trouble, adding a fine on top of that can be the final problem for them. The maximum fine was increased from £60 to £80 in August last year. Does anyone have any evidence about whether that has impacted school attendance either negatively or positively? Has the increased fine helped at all?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: We see on social media families making a very calculated decision that the cheaper holiday outweighs the fine they will get.

Heather Sandy: The problem with fining is that it is most effective when it is a deterrent—when it is never used. It is really hard to measure those who did not go on holiday because they did not want a fine, and those who did not go on holiday because of the social contract with the school and the fact that they did not want the school's disapproval. It is difficult.

What we do know is that attendance has improved. Can we attribute it to that, or the fantastic work that schools have been doing, or the work the Government have been doing with local authorities? It is really hard. For me, the problem with measuring fining is that it is meant to be most effective when it is used as a deterrent. When it is used as a deterrent, you cannot measure the negative, other than in the figures overall, which have improved.

Julie McCulloch: I think that is right; it is very difficult to look at cause and effect here. We have certainly got no indication from our members that the increase in the fine has made a difference, and we certainly hear that, if there are families minded to take their children on term-time holidays, in most cases they will factor in the cost of the fine, and the difference is not significant enough to make a difference.

Chair: I am going to move us on. I also want to highlight that we have very little time; we can probably run this session for another 10 minutes, and we have several topics that we would still like to ask you about. If you can be as succinct in answering as possible, and the same for our questioners, that would be much appreciated.

- Q11 **Mark Swards:** The Department for Education introduced guidance on "Working together to improve school attendance", and it was initially non-statutory when it was introduced. A previous iteration of this Committee heard mixed evidence on how effective that guidance was. However, that Committee still recommended that the guidance be made statutory, and in August last year, it was made statutory. Does anyone on the panel have any views on how effective this guidance is and whether making it

statutory has made it more effective?

Julie McCulloch: Our members think it is helpful, and the fact that it is statutory is also helpful. There are elements in there that they welcome, one of which I have already alluded to: the support-first approach and the encouragement of working with families. Schools are very positive about the data sharing that is going on at the moment on attendance, and the data dashboard. We are certainly hearing from them that they are now able to benchmark their own attendance levels across different groups much more effectively than they could before, and I think that is really useful.

There is a lot there that is useful, but there are two aspects of the changes to the guidance that they are finding less helpful, both of which are related to changes to the attendance codes. I think Susan alluded to this before, but the first is the change to what school leaders call the 30-minute window. Previously, if you had children who were coming into school late for registration but still attending lessons, you could code with them a late code and they would not count as absent—you would still track them, but they would not count as absent. Now, if children are not there within the first 30 minutes of the day, you have to code them as absent, and that is really unhelpful for both data and the relationship with those families. We would really like to see a change.

The other change has already been alluded to but I want to mention it, and it is the coding of remote education. There are pros and cons to children learning remotely, of course, but there are occasions where children are learning very effectively remotely, and that is often a stepping stone to getting them back into school. We would like to see a change to the attendance codes to recognise that, where children are being educated off-site in live lessons that are being monitored and evaluated by their school, it should be classed as a form of attendance, not absence.

Mark Swards: Those are very helpful suggestions—thank you.

Heather Sandy: May I just add to that? Local authorities and ADCS welcome the statutory guidance, but we discussed at the time that the funding that follows it did not come through. It is really good to have the statutory guidance, but we really need to see that funding come through to local authorities. On average, they have 2.2 officers to support this, and as we talk about the numbers growing, that is increasingly complex. I really welcome the statutory guidance, and our schools have been really positive as well, but can we think about long-term, sustainable funding? That applies to a lot of the other initiatives beyond the statutory guidance, including the attendance hubs and the mentors. We are seeing really great things but they are not across the country, and they are not funded on a long-term footing. We need to see that kind of consistency applied throughout.

Q12 **Mark Swards:** Absolutely. I know that the LGA did some research on this before it became statutory, and it found that 68% of councils actually increased their cost as result of the non-statutory guidance. Is there the



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money to pay for it now that it is statutory?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: There is the new burdens policy that says, "If the Government give us new burdens, they should be funded." However, the DfE said that this was not a new burden, and therefore there was no additional need for funding. The reality is that it has cost our councils £40 million, which the Government have not provided, and that seems to break the new burdens policy, so it is costing money. It is welcome and it is good, and it is good that it is there, but it needs to be paid for.

Q13 Darren Paffey: There have been a number of Government measures, such as attendance mentors and attendance hubs. We are interested in what impact those have had in changing anything. My specific question to Julie is around the Attendance Action Alliance, which was set up previously but has not met more recently. What is your view on how effective that was and whether it should it be reinstated? If any of the other members of the panel then have anything new to add to that answer, please do come in.

Julie McCulloch: I was a member of the alliance, which I guess is why you directed the question at me. I think it was a helpful initiative. It met a number of times—at least 10 times, I think—over the course of around 18 months. The principle behind it was very helpful and it brought people together from across education, social care and health to look at the issue in a rounded way. That was useful, and there were some helpful initiatives that came out of it.

You mentioned the attendance hubs and the attendance mentors, both of which are helpful but limited. At the moment, the intention is that the attendance hubs, which are still growing, will help around 500 schools. That is a drop in the ocean. The attendance mentors at the moment have been set up as a pilot that will be evaluated as a randomised control trial. Again, that is a very helpful thing to do, but tiny compared with the scale of the challenge.

My summary would be that there are some helpful initiatives that came out of both the alliance and other work the previous and current Governments have done, but they are probably not touching the vast majority of schools.

Q14 Darren Paffey: In terms of effectiveness, would you say that the measures of the alliance actually moved the dial overall, or could have done with more time?

Julie McCulloch: I think they did move the dial a little. We now need to move away from that sense that the answer lies in the centre and that we need to set up these initiatives and then cascade it out. We need to recognise that there is amazing work going on in different schools and areas, and perhaps find a way that is more based on priming that work, rather central direction. We are probably at a point now where that would be more useful.

Q15 Darren Paffey: Do you think the alliance should be reinstated?



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Julie McCulloch: Yes, I don't see why not. That sense of bringing the different services together was the most useful thing about it, and it would be helpful for that to continue.

Heather Sandy: Briefly, a lot of those initiatives are showing real promise, but if we do not get them under sustainable funding I am worried we will see that progress stalling. We are celebrating the progress we have seen, but we need to be ambitious about that going forward.

Q16 **Mark Swards:** Is the expansion of free school meals and the introduction of breakfast clubs likely to have any impact on attendance from low-income families?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: Yes.

Q17 **Mark Swards:** Very good. Any further answers?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: Yes—to be clear, a positive impact.

Julie McCulloch: Yes. I will briefly expand. The expansion of free school meals is absolutely something that we have been campaigning on for a long time. It would be really helpful. We would also like to see auto-enrolment as the next step. It is early days for breakfast clubs. At first we were slightly sceptical, but we are less sceptical now, having spoken to some of our members in the breakfast club pilots who are seeing some positive impact on the children they most want to bring into schools. There are a number of reasons for that, one being the free food for children living in disadvantage.

It is starting to feel like this is the place to be in some schools; children actively want to come in for those breakfast clubs. That then has an impact on punctuality because they are in school already, so they are ready to start learning. There is a potential there around that resetting of the relationship that we have been talking about. There are still a lot of challenges with those breakfast clubs in terms of funding and various other things, but the green shoots are positive.

Q18 **Mark Swards:** That is incredibly pleasing to hear. Any further contributions?

Heather Sandy: Lincolnshire is a pilot for the breakfast clubs. I would echo all of that. There is a lot of learning coming from the pilots, and it would be good to take stock of that learning but, like with attendance hubs, think about how we can move this on quickly. Again, the early signs are really positive.

Q19 **Manuela Perteghella:** I would like to focus on the specific group of young carers. From DfE data we know that young carers, on average, missed more days of school last year and have double the suspension rate of their peers without caring responsibilities. The Carers Trust suggests steps that can improve attendance for this group, such as schools appointing a young carer champion or having a young carer policy. Are there any other steps or policies that would improve attendance for young carers and support them? What does best practice look like in terms of



collaboration between local authorities and schools for this group?

Heather Sandy: I can give you an example. One of the problems for young carers is they are awfully worried about the person they are caring for when they are in school. One of the things we have been doing in Lincolnshire is working with our health colleagues to say, "If we have a young carer involved, can you schedule the medical appointments after school?" We have a card for young carers that allows them to say, "I am allowed to be in here. I want to be in here and I want to hear you talk, because I am the one who will go home and have some caring responsibilities".

It is about not just local authorities, but schools and health partners seeing young carers and recognising the fantastic role they play, and making sure that we work around the school day with that. It is about our health partners having the education about, "Wherever possible, can we schedule first thing or last thing?" We know that when those appointments are bang in the middle of the day, young carers will miss the whole day, whereas if they can come a little bit late, leave half an hour early and still be at that appointment, they will come and do their learning.

Julie McCulloch: I completely agree with all that, and schools are doing a lot of that and trying to work with their partners where they can. I would briefly link it back to the point I made about the late code. Young carers are one of the groups of young people who we hear most often find it difficult to get into school on time for obvious reasons. If we could shift to recognising that when they do make it in, schools are able to mark them as present, it would make a big difference.

Dr Morris-King: I would just add to that that, really importantly, and on a very basic level, it is about schools knowing who their young carers are. That often starts with the conversation about absence and lateness and why that is, and sometimes that comes to the fore then. Getting underneath reasons for absence in the first place remains an important factor.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: The coding bit is important so that there is a recognition that if a child needs to be looking after somebody, they are not penalised for that, nor is the school. There is also some work we could do so that if there is a problem at home and the family know, they phone the school and do not just text the child. That is so there is a cut-off, and children have a confidence that if there is a problem at home, and mum or dad or another child needs something, the school will tell them and will work with them and find a solution. You would have to trust school leaders and headteachers because they are very good, but some of the ways the bureaucracy works, in terms of coding when they are there or not, does not help.

Q20 **Darren Paffey:** A previous incarnation of this Committee made a recommendation that local authority support from councils should be audited—particularly things like education welfare officers—and that any funding to meet the guidance on that should be ringfenced. In your view,



does that recommendation remain valid?

Heather Sandy: It absolutely does. That will become a stumbling block as we move forward, because as my colleague said, we did not get the new burdens funding. Councils and local government are facing unprecedented financial pressure at the moment, and we will have to make difficult decisions. Everybody will be fighting for the same limited amount of money. I think first getting that money would be helpful, and then ringfencing it for this role.

Gerald Vernon-Jackson: It is helpful to look at it and examine what the outcomes are. The LGA is never keen on ringfencing, because it does not give discretion. My real worry is about local government reorganisation. In my area and yours, Darren, in our end of Hampshire, we have been told that there will be £33 million in extra costs because of local government reorganisation. That will mean additional cuts to all those discretionary services that are so important to making sure that youngsters are in school. So yes, do look at it, but do realise that local government reorganisation will mean less support for families and less support for children who are vulnerable. You have to be realistic about that. It is a Government decision to do local government reorganisation; you are choosing to make sure that there is less support for families.

Chair: Thank you all for coming to give evidence today. If there are any points that you would have liked to make, but that we did not get to this morning, please feel free to write to us afterwards. We would welcome that.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dan Lilley, Ellie Costello and Rachael Kenningham.

Chair: We will now resume our deep-dive evidence session on school attendance. I welcome our second panel of witnesses; thank you for coming to give evidence this morning. I invite panel members to introduce themselves and to make any relevant declarations of interest.

Rachael Kenningham: Hello, I am Rachael Kenningham. I am from the charity School-Home Support, a school attendance charity. We work directly with families, through schools, to help them to tackle some of the root causes of absence, which we believe are many and varied. By helping to get to the real root causes of absence and by building relationships with families, we feel that we can effectively deliver long-term solutions to the absence problem.

Ellie Costello: Hi, I am Ellie. I am from an organisation called Square Peg. We represent the voices of children and families who struggle to attend, access or remain in education. We have a partnership family support group with 75,000 families informally accessing support, information and guidance, with a participation rate of about 60% every single day.

Dan Lilley: Hi, I am Dan Lilley, a senior researcher at the Centre for Social Justice. School absence has been a key issue on which we have been conducting research for several years. Our upcoming report in September will be looking again at the root causes of the issue.

Q21 **Chair:** I will start with a nice open question: what factors do you see driving the much higher rates of absence since the pandemic?

Dan Lilley: We see very clearly the arguments made in the previous session around special educational needs, children from low-income backgrounds and mental wellbeing. What we have tried to do in our most recent research is to look at whether there are root causes underneath them that have not been spotted. We have identified three areas that we think are under-explored as root causes of school absence.

The first is that the environment for parenting has become much more challenging. Part of that is about technology, such as social media and smartphones, and part of it is that a much larger number of parents are very isolated, perhaps because of having moved or having a smaller family network or because of bereavement or separation. That all makes it much more stressful to be a parent. Then, of course, there is the mental health crisis that we are seeing as well.

The second thing is that the link between school and work has become much less clear for a lot of people, particularly in more deprived areas and in secondary schools, where we see a much higher level of severe and persistent absence. In key stage 4 in secondary school, we find lots of young people who do not see anything to gain from attending school, perhaps because they have a lack of work at home, they do not know as many adults who work and they do not think that they will get any qualifications that are useful to them, so they do not see the link between attending school and work.

Finally, as was discussed extensively in the previous session—we have seen a huge amount of this—the trust between parents, families and schools has deteriorated significantly, particularly for the most severe cases of absence. The schools that we have spoken to consistently feel as though parents do not back them up or trust their judgment, and parents feel that they are not being listened to and that their complex situation is not being understood.

Ellie Costello: I agree with that. Within attendance, you see all the vulnerabilities of family life, including the unexpected—the things that they cannot predict. In our usual at-risk cohorts, an absence difficulty could happen to any child at any time because their life can turn on a sixpence. We have covered children who are being bullied, those with unmet or recognised additional needs, those in temporary accommodation and those with caring responsibilities, and I would like to include sibling carers. We have enormous numbers of children who have siblings with very high needs, and they are not well understood within the young caring conversations. Finally, there are children with medical and health needs,



including children with high levels of mental ill health, for example those who are accessing an eating disorder clinic for their healthcare.

Another area that we cannot overlook is the impact of poverty on children's life and their family's ability to support them into school. Within that, we have the context of punitive measures in the school landscape and how they are impacting families' ability to engage with the system, when it is threatening them with fines.

Rachael Kenningham: I want to pick up on a point that was raised by the first panel about the complexity of some of the challenges that families face. The families we work with are, broadly speaking, disadvantaged; at least two thirds of those families are dealing with at least two major challenges. Those might be mental health issues, domestic abuse or poverty. Those issues make school attendance a second or third-order issue. If you have been evicted or moved to temporary accommodation two hours from home, getting your kid to school on time is going to be pretty tough.

It is really important that the system is able to treat each child as an individual and accept that every child and every family is different. In our experience, working with the whole family, building relationships with families and getting to the real root causes, including where mental health problems might be driven by more complicated issues, is really important.

We know that services over the last years have been underfunded for meeting the level of demand for support. That is a key issue that really matters and an area where we really need to change, but in the meantime we need to strengthen the bridge between home and school and we need to get to the bottom of the fact that families are facing complex challenges. They need practical and emotional support. That is something that I would really like to see the system embrace.

Q22 **Mark Swards:** You will have heard me asking the last panel about the now statutory guidance, "Working together to improve school attendance". What is your view of that guidance? Should any changes be made? I will start with Dan, for obvious reasons.

Dan Lilley: We have spoken to over a dozen headteachers, particularly in the west midlands, and they have overwhelmingly said that they appreciate the guidance and have found it helpful, but that there have been challenges with it and that it has been a necessary step forward, but only one part of a larger picture.

The main issue that they have identified—this also indicates the lack of trust that we see between home and school—is that they feel that too much of the responsibility is falling on them in the statutory guidance, and that where responsibilities have been outlined for schools, local authorities and parents, the only levers that are being pulled to ensure that those things are met are for schools. That is the perspective of many headteachers we have spoken to. Also, parents who need more support and need expectations to be made clear are often not getting that.



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Ellie Costello: It has been really interesting to follow the experiences in our group since the non-statutory guidance was issued in May 2022 and then made statutory last August. We saw a real shockwave for families: they were told that if their child was on a part-time timetable, a reduced timetable or a late start, that was no longer allowed. Lots of leaders felt that they could not be more accommodating or that they must act in a certain way. It added a layer of friction around those duties being enacted.

When we spoke to the Department, one of the things that came out was that the support-first approach really must be the first call, but that there is quite a patchwork in how timely that support is or how long it is given before additional measures are put in place. We saw a change in the coding, from 24 codes to 32 codes, which added complexity for leaders to navigate.

On exercising discretion, we heard from the previous panel that local authorities felt that they were acting on schools' instruction, but we heard from school leaders who felt that the local authority attendance welfare service was picking them up for not acting enough. There is a tension there. The duty to exercise discretion and follow exceptional circumstances is always there. Those are some of the things that we are not seeing.

While the guidance has been useful in making support-first explicit, I have concerns about the oversight mechanism. One of the things that we are calling for in relation to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which we are lobbying on at the moment, is an attendance code of practice that would bring together an additional layer of statutory legislative oversight. That additional instrument would tether together all the existing legislation and, with that parliamentary oversight, would be created in a cross-party and inter-departmental way.

Mark Sowards: That is very useful. Thank you.

Rachael Kenningham: The first thing to say is that the statutory guidance and its journey are really good things—they all go in the right direction. Following on from what colleagues on the first panel said, we are concerned that there is not enough funding in the system overall to deliver the ambition. The words are so much better—"support first", "family-centric". That is what we are all about, but it is about making sure that the funding and skills are there. We hear both local authority colleagues and schools saying, "We have all been working in a sanctions-based system for ages, so do we know how to do this stuff well? Do we know how to work with families?" That side of things is really important to changing cultures.

The guidance will have its first birthday in August, so let us start to think about what implementation is like and review that. Some people are doing brilliantly, but when the Ofsted inspectors come in, I would like to see how they are actually judging who is going the extra mile and who is not. Who is just doing a bit of a quick job—a quick call to parents or whatever? I do not want to see prescriptive systems that tie schools in knots, but how do we look at the inspection framework and say, "This has delivered the spirit of that guidance"?



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The terms “support first” and “family-centric” are open to interpretation, so how do we get that right? One of the big issues that we raised before was around responsibilities. In ’23 and ’24, we did some FOI research into the way the early help system was working with schools, and we found that, in one in four referrals to local authorities, families were bounced back with a no-action. Schools are thinking, “This is a case for the local authority”, and local authorities are thinking, “No, it isn’t.” The thresholds for who is doing what and the responsibilities need to be really clear.

We need to bear in mind that as we are wondering who is doing what, this is a family—a child’s life is ticking away, and families are out of the system. What we are calling radical collaboration between all the important agencies is a lot to ask of really stretched services, but we have to do it, because this stuff is so important. We know that the long-term consequences of kids missing school are really bad for them and for the country.

Q23 Darren Paffey: You will have heard me ask this question of the last panel, so it will be no surprise. I am interested in your assessment of existing Government measures like the attendance hubs and attendance mentors. What impact do you believe they have had?

Rachael Kenningham: First, all support is welcome. Lots of different things are going on in the early days, but we think that there is a policy gap, and we would like to see more precision, with interventions for different kinds of cohorts.

We would like to see interventions and targeted support for children who are between persistent absence and severe absence—we call them the missing middle. They are missing between 15% and 50% of school, so they are on the cusp. We think that if we put money and funding there and we support them, we can make sure that the issues driving absence do not escalate and we can hold them in the system. Whole-family support is that kind of intensive tool, if you like. The policy suite is looking good, but we think that there is a gap in it. We would like to see some more intensive interventions targeted at that group of kids. That will help with the problem.

In the first session, you talked a lot about severe absence, which is the category that is getting worse, not better. If we intervene early on with the missing middle, and try to support the families and get to the root of what is going on, we have a chance of holding them in the system so that they are not drifting towards severe absence. The current suite of policies is good, but it does not cover that more intensive need. Schools can do persistent absences and local authorities are more at the severe end, but how do we make the whole thing gel together?

Ellie Costello: In my conversations with the Department, there have been lots of good moves. We have had an increase in research with the EEF and the YEF. That was important to understand, because there is a lack of research out there. That will help to inform thinking.



On the attendance mentors and attendance hubs, I was speaking to colleagues who were part of the initial delivery of attendance mentors. They were saying that when we came out of the pandemic, our focus was on catch-up and tuition. We had the national tuition programme; that was then supplemented by the mentor programme. There was a disconnect between the purpose of good mentorship and what that looks like for the family and how that support is experienced.

I am a little concerned that attendance and behaviour are under the same umbrella. The experience of families can often be that this is a behavioural problem that needs correcting, rather than something that is well understood, supported and responded to appropriately, and is not too heavy-handed and destabilising. There is a real opportunity there to improve our thinking.

We successfully lobbied for the support-first approach during the 2022 Schools Bill, but it is support-first within a landscape where the ultimate consequence is a custodial sentence for mum. We have seen an increase in the numbers of fines and prosecutions. We should not underestimate how that use of the deterrent is impacting on things like the social contract. There is lots of good movement and lots of good thinking, but plenty more to be done.

Dan Lilley: I might focus on attendance mentors, which is something that the CSJ has historically recommended. I will largely echo the thoughts from others in that I think they are an encouraging step. It is worthy of some concern that the initial pilot was less successful than the models it was based upon from organisations such as School-Home Support.

We think that that is something to think about very intentionally when looking to the expansion, but the issue with the attendance mentors model is that it has to be seen as one part of a broader picture. Partly because of cost and partly because of the nature of the intensive intervention, it cannot be scaled in a way that addresses the size of the severe absence problem that we have. In the most recent termly figures, we had 170,000 severely absent children. The attendance mentors pilot is not going to exceed 10,000 or 15,000, at which point your absolute ceiling is going to be 10% of that. It is a very helpful crisis intervention, and it is something that we would very much support, but we also have to think about more scalable solutions to go alongside it.

One that we have seen, which has been very effective in a number of schools, particularly in the west midlands, is having a family support worker within a school who is employed full time by the school. Teachers refer children to them in the school setting, and the support worker can provide that whole family support. The case load is the entire school, because there is that ability for targeting from teachers who know the children very well and there is that ability for natural joining-up because you are physically in the space where you want the children to be. That could be a way of complementing the attendance mentors programme.

Q24 **Caroline Voaden:** We had a discussion about fines with the previous



panel, so I would just like to ask you how effective you think legal interventions such as fines are in improving attendance for different groups of pupils. Does it work with particular groups, does it not work at all, or is it brilliant?

Dan Lilley: A phrase that we like to use about fines at the moment is that they are simultaneously too harsh and too soft, in the sense that they are harsh enough that they damage the relationship between home and school substantially, but they are too soft in the sense that they do not seem to move the dial substantially on attendance, how much people take term-time holidays, and how often pupils are absent.

Our view is that we need to find an intervention that can provide something that works, but something where schools and families are working with one another. We think a better way of doing that might be an attendance awareness course. As an intervention for non-attendance, parents would attend a course modelled on the same idea as a speed awareness course. At the course, parents would be shown the importance of attendance and the consequences of non-attendance.

We have some polling that will be published in September alongside the report, and we found that over 40% of parents think that nine out of 10 days attending is a reasonable attendance rate. Nine in 10 is persistent absence, and over 40% of parents think that that is an acceptable attendance rate for their child. We also found that over 40% of parents wanted more help from schools in understanding how important attending school is, so there is both a clear demand and a clear need from parents.

We have also heard from school leaders consistently when speaking to them that the things that work are where they are working with parents, and where it is clear to them and clear to the families that everyone is moving in the same direction. Fines do not naturally do that as an implement, whereas a well-done attendance awareness course could do that, where everyone is focused on the wellbeing of the child, and it is done in that way.

Q25 **Caroline Voaden:** Do you think that maybe we are focusing on the wrong thing by fining parents whose child maybe attends every day all year and then takes one week out of school in June to go on holiday?

Dan Lilley: That is also a very good point. There is an element in legal interventions where the “too difficult” box is used extensively, and the fines that are issued are the fines that are easiest to issue, not the fines that are the most helpful to issue. I think the core problem there, though, is that fines as a lever are not very effective. That is the core issue.

Ellie Costello: I agree with that. I think that they are Dickensian and out of step, and I am going to say it plainly, because I think we are in really dangerous territory if we criminalise one person for another person’s offence. Our challenge is that we have a very inelegant tool and lever that we think is working well, but there is absolutely no evidence that fining families improves attendance long-term. You might nudge it temporarily—



they might pull themselves out of the hole and be able to succeed for a short amount of time—but it is not a long-term effect.

Nearly half a million penalty notices were issued last year—a 22% increase from the previous year. Court fines for truancy doubled between 2017 and 2025. Not only that, nearly half of county court fines remain unpaid within the legislative 12-month payment period. That takes up the justice system and they have to apply resource to that. It was reported that Hampshire county council had generated £1.6 million in revenue from fining families. The Department had said that that income stream could be put within the family support services, in terms of both enforcement and support. We have a system with some unintended consequences that are factoring into families' lives.

There is a bit of a misconception about informing families, especially when you look at those in the movable middle, if we are going to phrase it that way. Families often know exactly what is happening, and they have been not waving but drowning for a long time. We also need to hold in mind that the sensitivity threshold when you are considered persistently absent is now higher—or lower, depending on which way round you want to think about it. It used to be that you were considered persistently absent at 20%. Then it was 15%, then 12%. Now it is 10%. Arguably, if you have had chickenpox for two weeks, you are suddenly within the persistent absence range and at risk of being referred for a fine. If you are in a large school with an automated system and they do not know you well, your mum is likely to be threatened with a fine.

It is the threat that is a real problem—the fact that we think that this is an appropriate measure to exercise with children and families and that it is working well. If we are talking about the social contract being broken, it is part of the experience of families. They are taking issue with this approach. It feels inappropriate. They feel that they are not being listened to.

The severe absence families—those missing 50% or more—are known to services. They are visible, they are aware and they have been threatened or fined already. They are in insecure housing. Their child is in a placement that is unsuitable and that they cannot access. There are all sorts of things going on—dad is out of work or mum is struggling with chronic illness and the child is caring for them. We need to be really careful about the appropriateness of what is happening here. There is an opportunity to think differently and do things in a way that restores trust. Decriminalising school inattendance would be a positive step.

- Q26 **Chair:** Can I push you on the example you used? Is there any evidence that families are being fined for sickness absence? You use the example of a child being absent for two weeks because of chickenpox. That would not be an appropriate use of a fine because that would be an authorised absence. If there is evidence that that is happening, that would be of concern to the Committee., but I am not sure that there is.

Ellie Costello: Within the justice data, the protected characteristics are not captured in terms of the child. They may be captured in terms of the parent, but that is because we are prosecuting the parent for the child's difficulty or inability to attend. That data is not there. I can report only on the themes that are reported within our group. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence of families being prosecuted and fined or threatened with fines when mum is going through chemotherapy or a child is going through long-term illness treatment. That goes back to schools feeling that they must act. It is clear that when the sensitivity threshold is met, headteachers can exercise discretion, but feel that they cannot within the guidance, and, again, local authorities feel that they must act.

Chair: Thank you. That is helpful to understand.

Rachael Kenningham: I do not have a lot to add. We know that fines do not really work. They do not change behaviour, but they do damage relationships. I will not go over that. What I would like to see, and what works for us, is a more collaborative approach to tackling barriers to school and attendance. I want to see notions of co-creation in planning ways out of situations that are ideal for anyone, where families are respected as experts in their own lives.

Fines are the antithesis of that. We have not, however, called for fines to be banned because we know that schools—whose judgment we respect—believe that they are an important part of the system, but the sooner we can move in a whole-hearted, full-throttle way towards a family support system in schools where we can really get to the root causes, the better. I often talk about bringing time to talk back into schools, so that when there are sensitivities that need to be respected and understood, there is somebody working within the school—either through the school or for the school—who has the time, because they are not on timetable, reception or doing a hundred other things, to build a relationship with a family and get to the root of the problem. The more we do that, the less we will see of these inappropriate and insensitive fines, which do not really work.

Ellie Costello: There is some understanding to share on the penalty notices themselves and the strict liability offence of those notices, which means that there is no right to appeal. Parents, if they end up in court, are told that they cannot appeal because there is strict liability and so they are already guilty. The notices are issued through a single justice procedure, which has huge amounts of injustice baked into it. The Magistrates' Association has raised its own concerns about how penalty notices are issued in a closed court with no right to participate in your defence and with no right to representations to help you through that. Also, they are heard at an early stage and decisions are made within 90 seconds, with magistrates having to do that. There is a lot to look at within the processes and involvement of the judiciary along with families' rights to mitigation, which is entirely absent at the moment.

Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Q27 **Jess Asato:** We have heard that pupils with SEND have much higher



absence rates than their peers who have no identified SEND needs. Do school attendance policies currently strike the right balance between encouraging high attendance where possible, while taking into account the additional barriers to attendance faced by pupils with SEND?

Ellie Costello: School leaders are doing their absolute best, but obviously we have an expectation where nine out of 10 days is not good enough. We need to be careful in terms of the vulnerabilities of children for whom, perhaps for medical reasons or other reasons, nine out of 10 is actually doing really well. There is a conflict here where we have an aspiration of 100% attendance and we have posters in schools telling children that if they miss one day off school their lifetime earnings are impacted. What is happening is that those children are just saying, "What's the point?" In our aspiration and ambition to make sure that children do not miss out and benefit from everything that being in school offers, we have a real tension in terms of burdening those children and families.

We talked about shame around turning up late, and the feeling that you may as well not bother and asking, "What's the point?" because you are only going to get threatened with another letter if you are the mum, or put into isolation or detention for six hours if you are the child. We need to get into this. Schools, by and large, are doing an incredible job. Covid legitimised a position where they were going above and beyond, and really wanted to serve their communities. I think that is happening well, but yesterday it was reported that there was a multi-academy trust where every member of staff had a target of 25 detentions to issue every week. Where we have those perverse incentives around managing behaviour and high expectations, the experience of the duty on staff to deliver and manage that, and the experience of the children and families, is where that disconnect is happening.

Q28 **Jess Asato:** On the practice of rewarding children who have 100% attendance, those are often children who do not have medical needs and aren't often unwell because of inherent disability. Do you have a view on whether that is the right way to go about this?

Ellie Costello: Obviously it is stigmatising, children miss out and the best decisions are not always made. It is not always done intentionally. We want to reward the good, but we need to understand what good looks like for each child. I worry that these performative rewards erode the implicit sense of saying, "I can, but I'm not just doing it because I'm going to get a scooter or an ice cream. Actually, I'm doing it because I want to be here, and I enjoy being here because school matters to me." Again, I just think that it can have an adverse effect.

Rachael Kenningham: I really appreciate those comments, because it is a really important part of how we want the system to change to be more specific to the individual needs of individual children. I suppose I would point to the importance of national leadership on this issue. It is a massive problem and we are not currently shifting the dial. I urge the Secretary of State to continue to stay focused on this issue, and to keep it at the front of everybody's mind—I do not know whether that is the same thing. I



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think that national leadership is really important on this; we must be really clear, when we look at Ofsted, about the sort of things that we want to see in family support and those sorts of things.

It is difficult, isn't it? We do not generally want to give out a message that the school system is a bit rubbish and you do not have to go, but we want to acknowledge that there is a journey in creating a different system that speaks more effectively to all children. At the same time, we have to remind people that it is really important that we tackle the problem quickly.

Dan Lilley: I want to be careful around special educational needs and mental wellbeing, and I do not necessarily want to conflate those two. From speaking to school leaders, specifically on special educational needs, one thing we have seen is a high level of disorientation and a lack of clarity as to how to navigate the extreme rise. When it comes to mental wellbeing, partly as a consequence of lockdowns and the response to the pandemic, there is a feeling that the way in which we process child safety has changed. When we think about school attendance, we have lost faith in the basic principle that the safest place for a child is at school, and that a very effective mechanism to improving a child's wellbeing, if they feel anxious or nervous about school, is to have them in school more. Actually, avoiding school can exacerbate a lot of those challenges.

Obviously, this is something that needs to be done extremely sensitively, but the axioms on which we are working have slightly moved, as was mentioned in the previous session, because of the strong focus throughout lockdown that the safest place for the child to be was at home—that has changed the perception in a harmful way. With a lot of the problems of finding school stressful, or children finding themselves emotionally dysregulated at school, one of the key ways—if not the key way—of improving that situation, in a way that is both cost effective and good for the child's future prospects, is to have them in school more.

Q29 **Jess Asato:** That goes on to the next question, but I want to really focus on those children who have a disability rather than SEMH, for example. We know that parents may have their child out of school because they disagree with the named school on the EHCP, and they feel that sending their child to the current school is damaging to them, because they feel that they require a different situation.

We know that the system cannot always give the choices that are best for the child. In that situation, where the parents are really trying to advocate on behalf of their child, they are then served with a fine. In that situation, what do you think schools should do? Do you think the DfE's guidance is realistic in saying that there should be the same attendance rates for SEND children and those without SEND? Very briefly, because we do not have long.

Dan Lilley: We have two different situations there. We have a service that is struggling with huge waiting lists, which is causing genuine problems. We also have the fact that, as we have spoken about, the relationship and



trust between home and school is much more fragile, which means that a mild disagreement is much more likely to move to a serious disagreement and a breakdown of the relationship, as opposed to finding a solution together. I think those two problems are separate and both are very challenging to resolve—that is all I would say.

Ellie Costello: There is a need to understand how many specialist school places have been lost within the system. The local areas are on catch-up to reinstate them. Obviously, there is a drive within internal resource provision to increase those units. There is a tension because we are not just separating or segregating children, but we have an aspiration to deliver an inclusive experience in all of those schools. Family voice absolutely does matter, if we are going to allow any parent to have the right to express a preference—and it is a preference. The parents of disabled children should be afforded that right, and due consideration should be made in relation to that. I think that some schools feel that they sometimes cannot accept a child because it would impact the learning of others, and the aspiration for more inclusive approaches and more adaptations is an important part of that.

Rachael Kenningham: I have nothing to add.

Q30 **Mrs Brackenridge:** To consider the challenges that mental health and anxiety are clearly having on rising school absenteeism, I want to focus on one of the solutions that the new Government are bringing in: rolling out more mental health support teams directly into schools. Will that have an impact, and importantly, what would you like those teams to focus on?

Dan Lilley: It is an extremely good question and a very important thing to think about. It is an encouraging step, and we expect that it will have a positive impact. Obviously, time will tell and it is something to look at closely.

On the question of what the approach should look like, a lot of it will be a process of iterative learning. So much of responding to these things well is about listening and finding the most helpful approach. On a cautionary note, the approach has a degree of a sticking-plaster effect. It does not look, to a large degree, at anything structural or societal that is causing a rise in mental health problems among young people. It is a crucial part of the picture, but it should complement a broader and more thoughtful, long-term question about why mental wellbeing has been declining, and why mental health issues have been rising. As was mentioned in the previous session, we should look at things such as the impact of technology, and of more isolated families and more fragile homes, where children know fewer people and feel less attached to their community.

Ellie Costello: Mental health support teams are absolutely essential, but they can only do so much. They are not specialists, so they are not higher-level clinicians. They are a primary/secondary intervention based within schools, and unless the rest of the system is functioning, and children can access additional levels of support should they require it, then what they



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can achieve is going to be limited. We need to think about it within the landscape.

I am really pleased that the Government, through their latest research, have accepted the relationship between mental health and non-attendance. That could be parental mental health or child mental health. But those discussions are in the context of subjective wellbeing measures, not necessarily clinical assessments, so I would like to see some joining up between the Department of Health and Social Care clinical expertise and the Department for Education.

I would like to make a plea: as important as mental health support teams are, we must reinstate school nursing, because that level of first-tier clinical support is an absolute necessity. Of course, physical health and mental health go hand in hand, so it is essential that that clinical expertise is available to schools.

Rachael Kenningham: All support is welcome. I want to start by saying that. It probably will not surprise you to hear that I think that the mental health support pledge for secondary schools is a good thing. But the pledge and the attendance mentors programme focus on the child who is in school, not the home that the child returns to. That is quite a fundamental point.

I would like to see a whole-family support worker for every school, and we have been campaigning for that. It is really important that we take the time to triage and understand problems before we push people down one route or another. For example, if a child has mental health concerns, the school refers them to CAMHS and they go on a waiting list, does that create a scenario in that puts them in the mental health box when there are actually other things we could be doing with the family that might alleviate some of the triggers for mental health? Practical and emotional support might be really good. Being able to unpick what is really going on at the right time is really important, so I am really in favour of more support for pastoral things in schools.

I do not want to see headteachers having to make decisions whether to put a maths teacher in front of a class or have somebody else for the pastoral team. I want them to be able to have both if they need them. I am not sure that is the case at the moment, so we do need more support. We now need to acknowledge that it is about getting to the bottom of the issue and then signposting families to public services that are hopefully now better funded to do the job they need to do and work together.

Ellie Costello: As an additional layer to family support work, one of the services that I helped produce under the NHS long-term plan was a key-worker service. This was to avoid tier 4 psychiatric in-patients for 14 to 25-year-olds. In that service we saw children who were persistently absentees, and they were popping up with high levels of needs. In order for family support services to work really well, they need to have the teeth to be able to enact and deliver on behalf of the families in terms of what is beyond the family's gift or beyond the school's gift. That key worker

service in the joint commissioning arrangement structure is really important as an additional layer.

Rachael Kenningham: We would support that.

Q31 **Manuela Perteghella:** Finally, what else can be done to support pupils from low-income backgrounds to achieve good attendance?

Ellie Costello: Firstly, universal pre-school meals and breakfast clubs will be absolutely essential, but I understand there is prioritisation around that and the scaling of that. Universal support is often really welcome with families who are living in unimaginable circumstances, because a lot of the barriers for them come from stigma. As we heard in the previous session, they do not always have access to technology to fill in the forms or do not know they are entitled to access the support.

First—and this is really important—it is visibility that matters and discretion that counts. There is a way, in terms of really good social work, to uphold dignity and deliver equity at the same time. That is through that really great, skilled response that happens with and alongside families. We do not want to be missing families, but we need to know that we are not overly intervening, that we are not targeting them and that they are not feeling targeted. We must also make sure it is done respectfully in a way that enables and empowers, rather than makes them feel targeted.

Rachael Kenningham: There are two things. To help disadvantaged families who have got children, they need money in their pockets because, if you cannot make ends meet, getting your kid to school every day to access their education and prevent them from losing learning will be a second and third-order issue. Families need money in their pockets, but they also need support—and the right kind of support at the right time, which Ellie has spoken very eloquently about.

Dan Lilley: I would largely support much of that. One of the things we see with the higher absence rates among lower-income children is that it is normally due to other challenges that they are more likely to be facing, be it around mental wellbeing or the link between school and work not being clear. What we see, particularly personally, among lower-income students in secondary school, is that they are much more likely to have no one in their family who works, to know fewer people who work, to feel less tangibly that school is linked to an employment opportunity and to have less of a feeling that school is purposeful. Similarly, they are much more likely to have a complex family situation where whole-family support is needed.

In general, most of the best ways of improving school attendance are especially helpful for low-income pupils, and to have a separate design for low-income pupils would be something that we would be cautious about.

Q32 **Darren Paffey:** This is a related question, because the last Committee had evidence around these cost-related barriers. I am interested in things like school trips, uniforms, equipment—those kinds of things. There are measures, such as what is in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill,



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around the cost of uniforms, and so on. Is there evidence that you have seen, or that your organisations have been involved in, that would suggest specific measures? Dan, you have just said that to an extent you are a bit cautious about those which directly look at the cost-related element of it, if I understood that right, but what would you say to those kinds of interventions?

Dan Lilley: This is a brilliant example of how helpful the family support worker model is, because the model is a general model that is not in any way necessarily targeted towards low-income pupils, where cost is the reason they cannot attend school, but it is also, by some margin, the most efficient way to effectively and holistically target such things. We actually had a conversation with a family support worker in Coventry, where there was specifically a cost of uniform non-attendance issue. The family support worker had been able to visit the home and realise that not only was there a uniform issue but there were also no beds in the home and they were sleeping in sleeping bags. As Rachael mentioned, the fact that the support was holistic, and anchored in the school in the way that it was, meant that it was also the best way of addressing the cost barrier, even though it was not designed specifically with the cost barrier in mind.

Ellie Costello: I would agree. The thing that we hear from our families is that the discretionary, discreet relationship is really highly valued. A respectful level of engagement so that families do not feel “done to” but worked with and alongside, and empowered and enabled, is really important.

In addition, there is a lack of visibility in how early families feel able to ask for support, and then at the point that they do, it becomes seen through a behavioural lens—that their attendance is not good enough. If we do not address that head on and really think about that, we are only going to drive families further away from the systems that we want them to engage in, especially if they did not have a good time at school as well.

There is a real opportunity. Even things like World Book Day can be a barrier, as can fancy dress days and trips. Making it easy and accessible in a discreet way, so that families can access what is there in a way that upholds their dignity, is really important.

Rachael Kenningham: There is only one thing that I would add, because I think we have spoken quite a lot about how a family support worker within a school might operate. I want to link it back to having a whole-school approach to how we work with families. That is really key here. As I said, I have heard both from local authority colleagues and from school colleagues that there is a bit of a skills and capacity gap there. We could have some sort of extra support to train in schools. It can be cheap and cheerful. It does not need to cost a whole lot, on the safeguarding model perhaps, because certainly teacher training does not include how to work with families, for example—and maybe it should.

Could we do something that would be specific in terms of whole-family support workers, but also more general to raise awareness about the

importance of sensitivity? So many good people work in schools, but you sometimes need a bit of an extra professional lens to make sure that you do everything that you know you want to do, because the interests of the child are always first in your heart.

Q33 **Chair:** Just to be explicit about it, you are talking about a situation where a child and a family receive good support from some bits of a school, but might then be in a class and be penalised for something that should be part of that contextual view of that child, and how schools can be supported to make sure that there is consistency of support for every encounter that a child has in the school day.

Rachael Kenningham: Yes. It is about the support-first, family-centred approach, which is what the guidance asks for, being understood by everybody as the prevailing way we do things. I know that is happening in schools, but it needs to happen in all schools, so that all children and families can benefit. It means that the way it feels to be in school, both for families and for children, changes. That is where we get this notion of belonging that we really need to bring back.

Chair: That is great. Thank you for coming to give your evidence to us this morning. It has been very interesting for the Committee. It feels appropriate, at the end of this session on attendance, that I should also thank Committee members for their attendance, both in this session and throughout the parliamentary year that we have just had.